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Florence Elementary School teachers participating in the Los Angeles district's implementation of Literacy Design Collaborative hold a weekly planning meeting. Left to right are Susana Velasco, Denise Hernandez, Adriana Avila, and Maria Blanco.

TAILORED FOR A PERFECT FIT

**FLEXIBLE TEMPLATES PROMOTE
STANDARDS ALIGNMENT AND
TEACHER COLLABORATION**

Literacy Design Collaborative's templates and tools support students in doing work aligned to the Common Core and provide a growing experience for teachers as they work with colleagues to refine the lessons and tasks.

By Linda Jacobson

Susana Velasco always thought she designed lessons for her kindergarten students to help them meet the academic standards for their grade. But now she feels better equipped to adapt instruction to meet the needs of all the children in her class — a skill she has developed through her school's participation in the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC).

"I can be flexible with them, even my nonreaders and nonwriters," says Velasco, who teaches at Florence Avenue Elementary School in South Los Angeles. Her students have been making booklets about the life cycle of plants in preparation for a larger project on what plants need to live.

LDC gives teachers templates and tools that support students in doing more challenging work aligned to the Common Core. But the process is also a growing experience for teachers as they work with colleagues to refine the lessons and tasks to ensure they are asking students the right questions.

As part of a team of five Florence Avenue teachers receiving support in implementing LDC, Velasco is sharing what she's using with other kindergarten teachers, which shows Principal Consuelo Acosta that LDC also offers teachers the opportunity to set an example for their peers.

"These are my lifelong learners," Acosta says. "Anything I give these teachers, they run with it."

Learning more about how LDC impacts teachers' practice is one of the goals of a five-year, \$12 million Investing in Innovation (i3) "validation" grant from the U.S. Department of Education. LDC is providing coaching, summer institutes, and online training to groups of teachers in 12 Los Angeles Unified School District schools, including Florence Avenue. Another 15 New York City schools are also participating this year, but the numbers of schools will expand substantially over the course of the grant with the goal of involving 3,000

teachers in the New York and Los Angeles sites.

"We really think there are these fundamental teacher competencies that are being impacted through LDC work," says Suzanne Simons, LDC's chief of instruction and design. "They are getting wiser about certain core teaching competencies."

SCALING UP

Now a nonprofit, LDC began in 2009 as an effort to create templates that would assist teachers in incorporating literacy instruction into all subject areas — not just English language arts. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation brought together a design team of curriculum and literacy experts who created the LDC framework and shared it with a wide variety of groups, including state education agencies and districts, professional development providers, and other groups that were each able to bring their own expertise to the table.

The focus of the LDC process is the development of a module — a reading and writing assignment or prompt built around the standards and connected to the specific topics teachers are teaching in their content area. Because it is a template approach, LDC allows teachers the flexibility to choose the texts and tasks that best fit their goals and their students' needs. "Minitasks" help build students' skills and organize information as they prepare to complete the longer paper or project in the module and allow teachers to see whether students are understanding and meeting the expectations.

In Maria Blanco's 6th-grade class at Florence Avenue, for example, posters hang along the walls showing information the students have gathered from their research and organized into a "close reading quadrant" — a minitask the students are using to describe different aspects of government in early civilizations.

As she walked through classrooms, Megan Jensen, LDC's project director for the Los Angeles district, also

noticed one teacher had posted a prompt: “What were the four key problems faced by Mesopotamians? How did Mesopotamians attempt to meet each challenge?” The paper also lists the standards students will be working toward by responding to the questions. It’s a practice Jensen would like to see other teachers follow as well.

“To me, it’s about how does using the tools push teachers to plan with skills and standards in mind,” Jensen says. “The larger goal is that you’re building capacity at the school level and teachers would remain doing this work.”

In the 2010-11 school year, LDC was piloted in six school districts and among a teacher network and a network of schools. Since then, LDC’s growth has exemplified what it means to “scale up” something in education. There are now 2,000 modules and minitasks available to the public, and Simons estimates that about 50,000 teachers are now part of the system. The goal is to have at least 150,000 teachers by next year, but in a survey by the Gates Foundation, 275,000 teachers said they had heard of LDC or used one of the tools.

Four states have formally adopted LDC as a primary approach to meeting the Common Core as well as several districts, including the Fresno Unified School District in California, Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida, and Baltimore City Public Schools in Maryland. In 2013, LDC became an organization separate from the Gates Foundation. Its website provides an extensive library of minitasks, modules, and other resources, such as student work samples and rubrics. LDC also created Core-Tools, an online collaborative space where teachers and curriculum specialists can design and revise the own LDC modules.

To bring a consistent level of quality to LDC as it continues to grow, the organization partnered with Fresno Unified to launch a series of three online LDC courses. Even though states and districts are still providing training, Simons says “there are not enough coaches in America” to reach all the teachers using LDC. The first course introduces teachers to the process of creating an LDC teaching task, the second focuses on how to develop a larger instructional plan that includes the task, and the third covers implementation of a module and reviewing student work. In addition to receiving coaching every other week, the Los Angeles and New York teachers are also completing the courses.

‘A WRITING TEACHER AS WELL’

Teachers, especially those in social studies, say LDC has expanded their thinking about literacy in the classroom. Amanda Minnich, a social studies teacher at Woodland Middle School in Latonia, Ky., says it has changed the way she teaches historical documents.

“I had always taught the Constitution, Bill of Rights, Declaration, and other important documents, but now my students are truly digging deeper and becoming historical thinkers. And not only historical thinkers, but historical questioners,” she says.

“With the training and implementation of LDC, I started to believe and see that I am a writing teacher as well.”

Language arts teachers, however, are also seeing benefits to their practice — even if some at first thought the templates were too prescriptive.

“It can be very transformative for traditional English teachers who think they are just going to teach the content of a novel,” says Renee Boss, initiative director at the Fund for Transforming Education in Kentucky, one of LDC’s partner organizations. A former English teacher, Boss led LDC implementation in a district and says the reflection process involved in reviewing whether the module accomplished what was intended is a deep professional learning experience.

“LDC is a consistent reminder of how to intentionally sequence student learning for maximized student learning and success,” says Eddie Mullins, an English teacher and department cluster leader at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Lexington, Ky. “[The] minitask library and template tasks have been invaluable resources.”

Rebecca Reumann-Moore, a senior research associate at Research for Action in Philadelphia, says science teachers are sometimes the least positive about LDC because incorporating writing tasks into their lessons is an even greater shift for them than it is for social studies teachers. But still, there are many who say LDC has given them a broader perspective on their students.

“As high school science teachers, we assume that all students come to us as good readers and writers. That is not always the case,” says Tara Clopper, who teaches environmental science and astronomy at Greencastle-Antrim High School in Greencastle, Pa. “Since implementing LDC, I am now cognizant of my students’ reading and writing abilities. I can now tailor their learning by scaffolding lessons to their needs.”

She and her colleagues worked with teachers in the English department to design a module in which students write an essay arguing whether or not the gray wolf should be reintroduced into the forest ecosystem in the U.S.

“The beauty of this module is that the science and literacy concepts that we teach are used throughout the semester, not just during the module,” she says, adding that LDC has “forced me to eliminate the ‘fluff’ that I used to include in some of my units. If a minitask does not relate to the task, then it is eliminated.”

The schools involved in the i3 grant are also largely elementary schools, which indicates that LDC’s reach is broadening beyond middle and high school teachers. Using the templates and tasks at the elementary level flip-flops the purpose of LDC because it incorporates more content knowledge into reading and writing instruction, Simons says.

COLLABORATING WITH A ‘COMMON LANGUAGE’

Beyond the confidence they gain in their ability to teach

reading and writing — and pride they feel in seeing a higher level of work from their students — teachers say they’ve grown the most from LDC because of the opportunity to collaborate and swap ideas with other teachers.

“LDC has connected me to other educators through a few different networks and projects and allowed us to collaborate with a common language and goal,” Mullins says.

At Florence Avenue, the other four members of Velasco’s LDC group are all 6th-grade teachers — colleagues with whom she wouldn’t typically have the chance to work. “I can tell them what I’m doing, and they give me some real purposeful questions,” she says. “It helps me see the bigger picture.”

Clopper adds that, especially at the high school level, teachers often work alone or only with others in their content area. “I have learned so much from my peers and vice versa,” she says. “We all have strengths and weaknesses when it comes to educating today’s youth.”

Since it began, LDC training and collaboration has occurred both through online platforms as well as in face-to-face settings. Boss finds that there are benefits and pitfalls to both formats.

For example, bringing “a bunch of people” together in a room to write modules is not effective unless someone there has a lot of LDC experience, she says. Then there was the time that she participated in an LDC webinar with people she had never met.

“It felt disastrous to me — too many loose ends,” she says. “I think a lot of that has to do with a trust factor and really being willing to put your work out there for people to see.”

The Los Angeles and New York teachers involved in the i3 grant meet together at their schools, but receive virtual coaching using Zoom, a videoconferencing program. LDC also has a project director in each site as well as a district staff person to provide in-person support to the teachers and principals. Sarah Arroyo, the Los Angeles district’s LDC specialist, adds that her position also helps to establish some credibility for the project among teachers who are so used to having outside school improvement organizations come and go.

When the grant is gone, “we’re still going to be here,” Arroyo says. “It’s about changing the mindset of how you plan so instruction is rooted in the standards.”

‘WORTH THE TIME AND EFFORT’

The grant will be evaluated by the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing at the University of California Los Angeles. Researchers will compare performance in reading and writing of students receiving LDC to a similar group of students using other college- and career-ready curricula. They will also examine how teachers’ skills are improving by analyzing the modules they create and look at the long-term use of LDC teacher practice in the schools.

Long before the i3 grant, however, LDC leaders, partners,

and other researchers have thought about which aspects of LDC have the greatest impact on teachers’ growth.

“The diehards believe the value is in the design process,” Simons says. “But not all teachers are going to design curriculum.”

One reason could be due to the fact that developing modules takes a significant amount of time. In a 2013 paper from Research for Action — which has been following LDC implementation since 2010 — 85% of the teachers interviewed said it was difficult to find time to work on LDC modules. But the researchers also found that the more experience teachers gain with LDC, the more likely they are to say that their participation “is worth the time and effort involved.” Eighty-one percent of those with two years of LDC experience agreed with that statement, compared to 74% of first-time users.

“Developing and implementing modules is a rigorous process, which teachers seemed to embrace more fully as they gained more experience,” the authors wrote.

Simons adds, however, that there are many other ways teachers can benefit from LDC besides designing modules. For one, “even if you didn’t write it, teaching LDC modules is still better than not,” she says.

Another powerful experience is analyzing student work and discussing whether the students’ writing accurately addressed the prompt, says Ruemann-Moore. Revising modules is a third way for teachers to plug in to LDC even if they weren’t originally involved in the design.

In another report, published in 2015, Research for Action researchers summarized what they’ve learned about LDC implementation by surveying more than 1,500 teachers about their experiences. More than 80% of the teachers said using the modules had helped them increase the rigor of writing assignments and had raised their own expectations of their students’ writing. Eighty percent also said that they had developed new ways to teach literacy skills in their content area, and almost three-quarters of the teachers surveyed said they were applying LDC strategies to other parts of their instruction.

As Acosta noted, LDC work is also opening up opportunities for teachers to develop leadership skills without leaving the classroom. As part of the i3 grant, each school will have a project liaison — a teacher who will stay in contact with the coach and perhaps facilitate sessions when coaching time isn’t scheduled.

“The opportunities for teachers to collaborate and learn from each other has been a really positive experience for me as an educator,” Mullins says, adding that working with modules has led to “rich, thought-provoking discussions about not only individual lessons and units, but pedagogy, curriculum, and many other relevant topics that have made me a more effective and reflective teacher.”

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